

# Growing With Books

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## *Book 4: Reading, Talking, and Writing*

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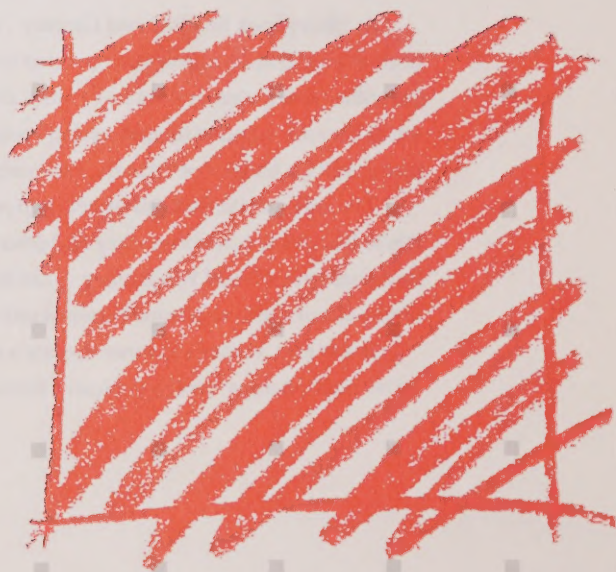
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*Prologue:*

*How Story Readers Become Story Makers*



## Prologue: How Story Readers Become Story Makers

Lissa Paul

Two kinds of response go into the act of reading: an individual, human response and a response based on a sense of story. Individual human responses vary. Sex, age, social conditions, values, and needs – all have a bearing on what the reader will find important in a particular text. The response based on a sense of story comes out of the reader's experience as a reader – that is, out of his or her knowledge of stories and the conventions of literature. "Reader-response theory" is the new term buzzing around the esoteric hives of contemporary literary theory these days to describe this active kind of reading. This theory shifts the emphasis away from the "objective" meaning of the text and puts it, instead, on the nature of the relationships between text, reader, and author.

What does reader-response theory have to do with language arts? A lot. The implications of reader-response theory are important for the ways we think about stories and the ways in which we talk about them in the classroom. The articles in this section provide some clues on how to do that.

In "Storybook Reading and Literacy", Paul Shaw talks about the need to establish an appropriate context for approaching a story. He describes how a medieval society comes alive for a group of children when they are asked to imagine going back into that world and participating in it (as knights or farmers, for example).

The way a child finds his or her own place in a story is the subject of David Booth's article about story and drama. He demonstrates how John Burningham's *Would You Rather...* can be the source of a personal drama about the interactions between self and other.

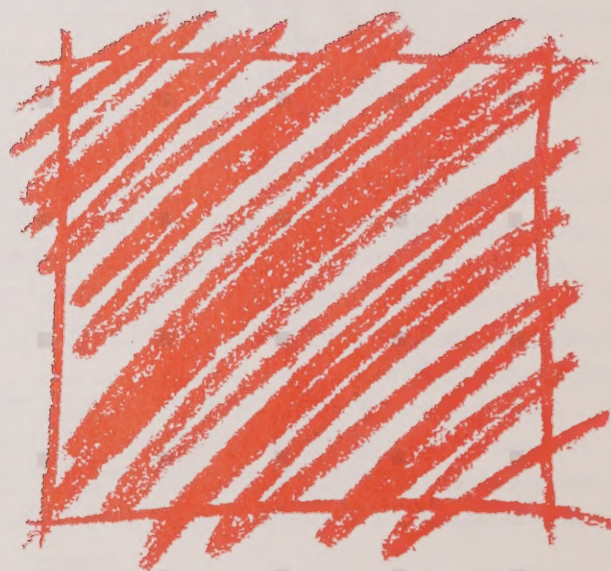
In the end, reader-response theory is simply a way of describing active relationships – conversations – between reader, author, and story.

But the implications are profound. The theory calls into question the whole idea of what we mean by comprehension. "Right" answers become less certain. In fact, right questions become less certain. As a teacher, it is up to you to make your students conscious of the fact that they respond to stories actively both as individual human beings and as people who have inherited a legacy of stories.





*Reading to Children*





## *Reading to Children*

*Joan McGrath*

The things adults do "for the children" are by no means always a pleasure in and of themselves. Reading aloud, however, is one of those rare, intrinsically rewarding activities. Sharing a book with a child (or children) allows an intimacy and communion all too rare in these noisy times. Even without the flowering hedge of "fringe benefits" that this activity offers, the pure pleasure of the experience would make reading aloud more than worth the expenditure of time and effort.

Reading aloud – to one's family, one's children, or anyone with whom it seemed pleasant and desirable to share a favourite story or verse – was a popular pastime not so very long ago; in a quieter time, to be sure. The honourable place of the storyteller or reader-aloud was usurped first by radio and the early "talkies", then by television, and most recently by video; and that is a pity, for several reasons. Anyone interested enough in the subject can undoubtedly suggest many of the benefits of reading aloud for both reader and audience; but some aspects of this rather neglected subject bear reiteration, especially in the particular area of reading aloud to children.

Reading time should be a time for pleasure, for simultaneously stretching and relaxing the mind. Where television and video shrink the viewer's ability to imagine or visualize, reading aloud puts demands on these underused faculties. Most children spend the greater part of their time in school fully occupied with the difficult though rewarding work of mastering a challenging curriculum. Learning to read is in itself a gigantic task. We adults, who have long since forgotten our own first stumbling attempts, no longer appreciate what an effort it all seems just at first.


Even those beginners fortunate enough to have appropriate, attractive, intrinsically enjoyable materials available, are at first so deeply engaged with the mere mechanics of reading that the experience is likely to be one of effort rather than of pleasure. The deciphering tasks they

face require deep concentration, to such an extent that young readers, while they may well decode all the words, quite miss the tune. They plod along and reach the goal, but they don't really have much chance to enjoy the trip.

That is where the reader-aloud comes into the picture. A reader who chooses the right sorts of varied and attractive materials keeps alive in the beginner's mind the hope and belief that soon he or she will be able to enjoy "real" books, rather than the repetitious controlled-vocabulary readers; books that even an adult can read with obvious pleasure. This brings us to an important – *the* important – point, about reading aloud. If you enjoy the experience and can communicate your own pleasure in it, the children will remember the reading with delight.

It is not difficult to communicate your personal pleasure in reading aloud. In fact, it should protect you from one of the minor agonies some good-hearted but mistaken persons undertake with the best of motives and the poorest of results: *don't* read aloud any piece of literature, at any level whatever, that you yourself do not find enjoyable. Since we live in a society wealthy beyond the dreams of literary avarice, it will be truly amazing if you cannot find something to read that you and your children can share with genuine pleasure.

Build a personal repertoire of such enjoyable stories, and add to it continually. You'll read a selection better every succeeding time, and if it is a well-chosen tale it will remain evergreen. It's a truism among librarians that you simply cannot sell a book that you yourself don't enjoy, however hard you work at it; maybe *because* you have to work at it. Somehow, try as you will, the true joy is lacking. Magically, the children instantly recognize this and greet your efforts with apathy or downright hostility. On the other hand, when you share a book you genuinely enjoy, the children sparkle along with you, begging for "just one more chapter", and demanding more books as good as that one; the applause rewards reading aloud in much the same way as a curtain call rewards a performance on stage.



Make no mistake, this is your chance to be better than a star. You get to play all the parts! You can be a ghost, a pirate, a swashbuckler, or a bear – no props or costumes are needed. But as with any performance, a rehearsal will be necessary if the performance is to be a polished one. It's a cardinal mistake to launch into unknown waters before an audience. Chances are you'll escape unscathed almost every time; but almost isn't good enough. Those who have attempted this foolhardy feat could share quite a few stories of embarrassing moments. The problems that arise may be simple ones of stumbling over unfamiliar names or uncommon words; mid-story is no time for a demonstration of dictionary skills. You may not find the proper cadence, or may fail to project the tones of surprise, fright, suppressed mirth, and so on, that may be crucial to achieving the desired effect. Worse, you may find that you have unwittingly embarked upon a story whose content will be embarrassing or offensive to you or to the audience. Don't make such a mistake "on stage"; try it out on the dog.


A good read-aloud need not be new, any more than it need be a veteran: good titles can be found in both categories. What it must do is read aloud well. Lots of good read-to-yourself titles are just that; somehow, when read aloud, they fail to fall pleasingly on the ear. Some have long, dull introductory chapters to which young listeners respond with impatience. (Remember, you don't have to read everything in any text. Good readers-aloud edit as they go, where necessary.) A mere handful of sure-fire read-alouds for juniors might include such favourites as *Underground to Canada*; *How to Eat Fried Worms*; *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*; *The Secret Garden*; *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*; *Lassie Come Home*; *The Iron Man*; *How Tom Beat Captain Najork and His Hired Sportsmen*; *The Pinballs*; *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. Pick one you like and read it to yourself; if possible make a tape of yourself as reader, to monitor your own performance.

Choose materials that are appropriate to the age and interest levels of the children with whom you are dealing. And be sure to call upon the assistance of those best prepared, indeed most eager, to assist you in doing so: the teacher-librarians whose business it is to keep abreast of today's flood of new materials. A lot of wonderful new books are available – but so is a lot of dross. The classroom teacher quite simply has not got the time, and possibly not the expertise, to plough through great mounds of new titles in order to discover the best and eliminate what is inappropriate, while the teacher-librarian's job is to do just that.

Be wary about selecting your own cherished favourites without reconsidering them in light of the new function they are now to perform. Have they really stood the test of time? Do you remember the contents as well as you think you do? Just consider: part of what you loved about those well-loved stories had to do with the circumstances in which you first encountered them; also, you were a lot younger then, with unformed and uncritical tastes. Reread the "olde tyme" favourite to yourself. You may rediscover it with undiminished pleasure; or you may find that it espouses attitudes or uses language that are today considered offensive, or that a book you have advertised as a great treat is one you find no longer to your taste. Avoid having such dismaying revelations sprung on you in the middle of a reading-aloud session.

Don't ever call youngsters away from some pursuit in which their interests are fully engaged for their prescribed "reading time". Even if it is to hear a story they'd ordinarily enjoy, they will certainly feel nothing but resentment if it interrupts a baseball game. Who wouldn't? Excellent times for reading are directly after a strenuous activity, at the completion of a project, or at the end of the day, when the youngsters are in a relaxed and receptive frame of mind, just as bedtime is the best reading-aloud time in the home.





It may be tempting to make read-aloud time merely an extension of the curriculum portion of the school day, but resist the temptation. Make reading time a looked-for treat, not just another treatment. Youngsters who have spent all day hard at work (and never forget just how hard that work is; according to most experts, learning to read is the most intellectually demanding effort most people undertake in their whole lives!) should not be faced with more of the same in what is supposed to be a pleasantly relaxing interlude. Leave the reading instruction and lectures on content subjects to instructional time. This is your chance to demonstrate why all the day-by-day slogging really is worthwhile.

This is your opportunity to provide living proof that you, yourself, are glad you learned to read because it can be such a source of pleasure. Always remember that some of the youngsters in any given class may have had little or no opportunity to observe any other significant adult in their lives reading just for the love of it. Almost everybody tells children they should read in order to enjoy books and to explore their riches; but few adults actually model this much-lauded behaviour. You can ensure that they see at least one adult practising what everyone preaches. All day you and your children have been busy seeing that they dealt faithfully with the meat and potatoes of education. Reading aloud is your chance to sit back, smile, and offer the dessert.

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*Storybook Reading and Literacy:*

*Children's Responses to Stories*



# *Storybook Reading and Literacy: Children's Responses to Stories*<sup>1</sup>

*Paul Shaw*

Children's facility with the forms and practices of literacy has a significant bearing on their development of language and cognitive skills at school. This facility is communicated to children (as described previously by Gordon Wells) through storybook reading rather than through talk. Children who have a knowledge of literacy practices have developed, through experience with literature, an appreciation for the patterns and structures of sustained written discourse. This sustained written language most often is introduced to young children as they listen to stories read to them by their parents. Storybook reading develops the child's sense of story and this sense of story – a macro structure, if you will – can help the child organize, make sense of, and come to know bodies of information, knowledge, and experience. Storybook reading also brings the child to written language in ways that, in part, are determined by the very characteristics of such language. These qualities or characteristics become apparent when one compares written and spoken language.

Written language differs from spoken language in that the meaning that is to be communicated lies entirely within the text itself. In conversation, the meanings that are exchanged arise out of the context of the current activity, the shared experience and knowledge of the past, as well as the option to question and clarify, as meaning is negotiated between the participants. In written discourse, however, particular attention must be paid to the language in stories and other written texts; in order to build up the structure of meaning, the reader must attend to the words and structures, for they are the sole keepers of the meaning of the text.

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1. The author would like to thank the following teachers who so willingly taped stories being read in their classrooms and who provided the examples used herein: Margaret Simmons, Dundas Street School, Toronto; Larry Swartz, Nancy Wannamaker, and Carole Brown, Floradale School, Mississauga.



Storybook reading also exposes children to the symbolic power of language – its potential to represent experience in symbols that are independent of the objects, events, and relationships symbolized and that can be interpreted in contexts other than those in which the experience originally occurred:

The Rainbow itself was reborn more magnificently than ever. Out of gratitude, it lifted up the flowers that had saved it and transformed them into glittering dragonflies and butterflies and splendidly plumed birds.<sup>2</sup>

This is not the language of everyday conversation, but is an example of the kind of “contextually disembedded” language that Margaret Donaldson has argued is necessary for success in schooling in that it permits the child to become capable of manipulating symbols and to deal with more abstract concepts and ideas.

While sharing books in class, the teacher may interact with the students and the text in such a way as to bridge the gap between text (where the meaning and intentions are fixed) and the child’s knowledge and experience of language and the world.

The story as a context for learning is an extremely effective means for children to make sense of their world. A story may be a vehicle not only for learning new things, but also for seeing existing knowledge and experiences in different ways.

The child uses his or her patterns of story – to provide the necessary framework of understanding – in two ways: to learn to organize new knowledge, and to see existing knowledge and experience in alternative contexts. Given this notion it is easy to argue that literacy is the key to all learning.

Consider the formidable task that confronts Grade 4 students who might be expected to develop a project about life in medieval times. It is very difficult for young children to conceptualize life in other times. It is necessary for the children to locate, list, summarize, to synthesize a large

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2 U. De Rico, *The Rainbow Goblins* (New York: Warner Books, 1979).

body of new information; to place this new knowledge into the somewhat unfamiliar and abstract context of a project. Projects, essays, or other compositions are expected to communicate what the child has discovered and to organize this information in some way that tells, discusses, argues, and/or explains events that, in this case, occurred in another time. As teachers we are all familiar with the type of product that we might receive under such circumstances. There is a clear sense from the language that the child uses that the child has not made the knowledge, concepts, and ideas his or her own. Sentences and overall organization lack the cohesion that would suggest that the child has really assimilated much at all about the project.

Alternatively, consider this approach developed by teachers at the Floradale School in Mississauga, Ontario. At the children's suggestion they deal with time by travelling back to the tenth century in a time machine. "Travelling back", and representing this with a timeline, helps the children conceptualize their ideas of time. Having arrived back in medieval times, the children, in groups, are placed in the *contexts* of various stories.

If one were to view an elementary story structure as having four essential components – a setting; a lack or problem; a resolution; and a restoration to the original set of events – then in this case the children were given the setting.

As reporters from this age who have to gather information to complete a story, they were placed in such settings as a rural farm, a village, with the knights in a castle, or at a wedding at a castle. What is significant here is that the context in which they are to learn is one with which they are most familiar – that of a story. The macro-structure or framework within which they are to organize this information is totally familiar. As well, because they themselves are participants in the story, they are initially able to act upon this new information in a personal way, which is a necessity if they are to make it their own.

The following examples illustrate: (1) the central role that literacy plays in all learning; (2) the significant role storybook reading plays in helping children become literate; and (3) the idea that the children's knowledge of story may be used in a powerful way to provide the structure necessary for the learning of new information. If storybook reading leads to a knowledge of literacy practices and the nature of written language, then the stories that are read and the way teachers read these storybooks to children must also be of considerable significance.

In one method of storybook reading the story is not simply told or read; instead the children are able to interact with the text by sharing, questioning, comparing, relating, contrasting, and linking prior knowledge and experiences to the story. This interaction – or, if you prefer, participation – bridges the gap between the text and the children's existing knowledge and experience of the world and of literacy practices.

In some ways the interaction with the text may be seen as a type of scaffolding that supports the child in making sense of his or her world. If, in interacting with text, the child is able to bring experience to, and make meaning from, the story, then it may be argued that the text itself has provided the structure by which the child has made meaning.

In interacting with the teacher during story sharing time, meaning may be negotiated, developed, and extended by bringing experiences with other literature to the present story, as the following exchange suggests:

TEACHER: This is one of my favourite stories – *The Rainbow Goblins*.  
Did anyone ever read or hear about goblins or this kind of creature?

CHILD: Yes.

TEACHER: What did you read?

CHILD: Goblins – greedy goblins.

CHILD: The one I read there was goblins and they can fly in outer space.

TEACHER: And I had another book about goblins – who can remember it? – Teepu?

CHILD: It was called *The Goblins*.

TEACHER: What kind of book was it?

CHILD: A pop-out book.

TEACHER: Was there any story in that one?

CHILD: The girl chases her brother all around the forest, and the boy sees all these creatures but the sister doesn't.

TEACHER: And refuses to believe that they were creatures.

In this discussion a context for the story is introduced. Jerome Bruner, who first introduced the term "scaffolding" in reference to mother/child interaction, identified reducing the degrees of freedom, concentrating attention into a manageable domain, and providing models of expected language as useful behaviours in adult/child interaction.

Stories come in various genres, each genre having its predictable patterns and structures that the children come to know through their experience with the genre (often through the storybook reading of the parent or the teacher). It is the experiencing of patterns and structures that develops the child's sense of story. In interacting with the children and the text, teachers can pause for a moment to enable the children to respond to the story by predicting the possible outcomes and so enhance their understanding of the plot and structure. Such pauses may simply be to ask, "What do you think will happen next?"

TEACHER: If I asked you right now to draw a picture of a goblin – how would you picture him in your mind? Just think for a moment – maybe close your eyes and try to picture a goblin.

(Various images are described.)

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3. J. Bruner, "The Role of Dialogue in Language Acquisition", in *The Child's Conception of Language*, edited by A. Sinclair; R.J. Jarvella; and W.J.M. Levelt (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1978), p. 254.

TEACHER: Now we have an image of a goblin.

Why Rainbow Goblins? What could Rainbow Goblins do?

CHILD: Take the colours from the rainbow.

TEACHER: Take the colours from the rainbow? What else could they do?

CHILD: Make the colours.

TEACHER: Make the colours.

CHILD: Mix the colours.

TEACHER: Mix the colours.

CHILD: Eat the colours.

TEACHER (*enthusiastically*): Eat the colours.

CHILD: Disappear them.

TEACHER: Disappear them – good.

CHILD: Maybe they invented them.

TEACHER: Invented them.

All those are possibilities that we'll have a chance to explore either in a story or perhaps a play.

Maybe they changed them, maybe they made them disappear, maybe they rearranged the order, maybe they invented them. Let's find out what happens in the story.

Underlying the notion of scaffolding is the idea that whatever the child produces is acceptable. It is the teacher's role to mediate, not dictate. Efficient readers and language users use the strategy of predicting words and ideas that will follow what they have already read or heard. For instance, readers who have learned to predict form a hypothesis about what the text is likely to say in the next few words or sentences, and then read on to see if their predictions are correct. Sharing stories is a powerful way to foster prediction strategies.

Relating previous stories and books; contrasting and comparing plots, characters, and pictures; reading to children a series of books by the same author – these are all ways of having children come to know



authors and illustrators and enabling them to use this knowledge to predict the nature of the stories, the qualities of the characters, and the outcomes of plots.

Consider this discussion that took place after the reading of *Harald and the Giant Knight*, by Donald Carrick:

TEACHER: . . . What other stories do we know that were like this one?

CHILD: *The Stained Glass Window*.

CHILD: *The Runaway Serf*.

CHILD: The one about the two kids who had to marry each other.

TEACHER: The two children that were betrothed. . . . Tell me about one that also had a knight in it.

CHILD: There was a knight in *The Stained Glass Window*.

CHILD: But he was a good knight – he was kind to his people.

TEACHER: What would it be like to live under a good knight?

CHILD: Well, a good knight would be interested in his people – he wouldn't take all their food like the knights did to Harald.

CHILD: The knight in *The Stained Glass Window* was a farmer – he liked to work on the land and be with his wife rather than to fight.

TEACHER: But he did go to the baron's castle each year to help defend it.

In this example the teacher tends to follow the children's lead. In providing scaffolding for the child's understanding, the teacher's participation must be guided by what he or she perceives to be *the child's intentions*.

Children strive constantly through their actions to make sense of their world and to construct a reality for themselves. Language may be viewed as an object of knowledge upon which children need to act and react in order to make it their own. When storybooks are read to children, the children need the opportunity to act on the author's text (on one or more of the content, the emotions, the language, the symbolism, and so forth) in order to make the story their own. This may be done in many ways, but most simply through the notion of placing the child into

the context of the story. A good example of this occurred during the interaction that surrounded the reading of *The Sea People*. In this story the people of two adjacent islands who enjoy very different values and lifestyles become pitted against each other as the more aggressive, materialistic islanders begin to take the earth from the smaller island in an attempt to extend their holdings and wealth.

At this point in the story the blind man speaks to the king of the larger island on behalf of his people:

The king screamed in fury, "The law of life demands order and diligence! We on this island have always obeyed the law. We have worked from early morning till late at night. You just live each day as it comes. You are lazy, idle good for nothings!" And he ordered his servants to carry him away.<sup>4</sup>

TEACHER: How did you feel when you found out that the king said you were "lazy, idle, good for nothings"?

CHILD (*immediately slipping back into role*): Well I don't think it's fair, we have no need to be working all the time. We have time to enjoy our friends, our mountains ... the ocean ...

CHILD: That's right – why are you people always working all the time anyway?

CHILD: But if we do as the king says, look at the riches we will have – we'll have treasure and big buildings, and our king will have ...

CHILD (*excitedly butting in*): We don't care about those things.

CHILD: How do you know that what your king says is right?

In this article I have argued for the importance of storybook reading in the development of children's knowledge of literacy practices and have pointed out the centrality of literacy to all learning. The examples given show children responding to storybooks in a variety of ways that are likely to enhance their concept of story, their ability to use prediction strategies, their knowledge of written language, and their understanding

4. J. Muller and J. Steiner, *The Sea People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).

of its symbolic power. The teacher/child interaction described here shows, among other things, the teacher acting as a mediator, interacting with the child and the fixed meaning of the text to move the story closer to the child's level of understanding; the more skilled language user provides support for the child in developing complex linguistic abilities and meeting the accompanying cognitive demands. In view of this, I would invite all teachers to harness the power of story in their classrooms.

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*“Would You Rather . . .”*

*Looking at Drama and Story*



## *"Would You Rather . . .": Looking at Drama and Story*

David Booth

John Burningham's wonderful picture book *Would You Rather . . .*<sup>1</sup> is a perfect vehicle for blending story and drama when working with children. It also provides a useful working model for an examination of the relationship between these two modes of learning. From the very first page, readers are inside the book, as the author invites them to make a choice from among three situations:

Would you rather . . .  
Your house was surrounded by  
water, snow or jungle

Immediately the children begin choosing the environment that conjures up in them the most vivid images. When I add, "You are living in your house in that place at this very moment. Tell me what it is like", the element of dramatic involvement is introduced; the children spontaneously become a part of the literary fiction, identifying with their own particular vision of life "there and then" while working "here and now".

Authors use this magic "as if" to draw the reader inside the life of the book, and drama works on the same premise. Children who have had experience in creating their own dramatized stories bring a greater sense of expectation to print, since the speculative nature of spontaneous role playing develops the child's ability to think creatively, to examine the many levels of meaning that underlie each action, and to develop the "what if" element that is necessary for reading. Just as a story can affect the drama to follow, the learning experience in drama can increase the child's storehouse of personal meanings, thus altering any meaning he or she brings to the text.

Because of the nature of my work, I generally meet a class of children once in a demonstration setting, and therefore I must choose books that draw from the children an immediate response, so that I can move

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1. John Burningham, *Would You Rather . . .* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978).



them into a situation where we can begin building the "as if" world of drama. *Would You Rather...* ... opens doors at once with children of every grade level. As I read and show the book, I stop every so often to let the children contribute their responses and feelings about the author's ideas through storytelling and dramatic role playing. By questioning children as if they are in role, I can help them picture that world, and the role gives them the public voice with which to share the creations of their imaginations.

GRADE 1 CHILD: My house is surrounded by water.

DAVID BOOTH: Do you live on an island, or perhaps a houseboat?

CHILD: A peninsula, but you can't get to the top end; it's landlocked by a mountain.

DAVID BOOTH: Do you have a boat?

CHILD: Not a motor boat. No one in my family believes in them. We only use sailboats.

DAVID BOOTH: Well, what do you do if there is an emergency and there is no wind?

CHILD: There is a kayak, and I can paddle it very fast and go for help. There is a boat ambulance on the mainland.

As I interact with the children, using their own ideas, I am able to help them to understand the consequences of what they are seeing and saying, and together we fashion their own imaginings into a personal, coherent story. Dramatic role playing helps the children go one step beyond identifying and empathizing with the story; they begin to use the story elements to structure their own thoughts, reacting and responding personally, entering as deeply as they wish into the new world of meaning. Through drama, they may move from the particular experience of

the story to a more general understanding of the nature of what is being explored, making explicit much of what is implied.

Would you rather be made to eat . . .  
spider stew, slug dumplings, mashed worms,  
or drink snail pop

GRADE 5 CHILD: Snail pop.

DAVID BOOTH: Where did you get it?

CHILD: Me and my dad make it every summer. First, you catch the snails.  
We invented these neat traps. Then you begin the process of  
turning them into the drink.

DAVID BOOTH: How do you go about that?

CHILD: Well, it's all based on distillation. The important thing is that you  
just use the essence of snail, none of the meat.

DAVID BOOTH: Why?

CHILD: It clogs the straws when you drink the pop.

DAVID BOOTH: And what do you put the pop in?

CHILD: Cans.

DAVID BOOTH: Why not bottles?

CHILD: Well, my dad and me used bottles once, but there was a problem. The night we did it, my dad woke me up at midnight, and he said that they were exploding all over the place because we had used too much yeast, and so we had to take all of the bottles into the back yard and bury them, so that no one would be hurt.

As this child built his personal story spontaneously in-role by storytelling, he used his own knowledge and background to elaborate upon the literary stimulus. Drama tells me what a child has taken from a story, so that I can help him or her examine and explore the possibilities of what has been read, heard, or viewed. Through such externalized representations as drama, children's perceptions are altered and expanded. As

students grow in dramatic ability, they improve their communication skills – grappling with experiences, playing out problems, and learning to use the conventions of the medium.

Would you rather ...  
An elephant drank your bathwater  
An eagle stole your dinner  
A pig tried on your clothes  
or a hippo slept in your bed

These delightful choices promoted much lateral thinking among the children. They hitch-hiked on each other's stories – elaborating, extending, and inventing scenarios that revealed the way in which children make sense of the ridiculous, building networks of meaning from each imaginative situation.

GRADE 1 CHILD: An elephant stole my bathwater.

DAVID BOOTH: Were you in the bath at the time?

CHILD: Yes.

DAVID BOOTH: Do you mean the elephant drank the dirty bathwater?

CHILD: No! Elephants just put the water up their trunk so that they can use it later on.

DAVID BOOTH: Was the elephant a pet, was it from the circus, or was it a wild one?

CHILD: It was the neighbour's.

GRADE 4 CHILD: An eagle stole my dinner.

DAVID BOOTH: What were you having for dinner?

CHILD: Every vegetable you can think of.

DAVID BOOTH: A pig tried on your clothes?

GRADE 2 CHILD: Yes, my jeans, my T-shirt, my socks, and my Adidas.

DAVID BOOTH: Why do you think it did that?

CHILD: It wanted to see me naked.

DAVID BOOTH: A hippo slept in your bed? Did it break it?

GRADE 1 CHILD: Yes, but it didn't mean to.

DAVID BOOTH: What did your mother say?

CHILD: Well, I was afraid to tell the truth, because I had been warned about having all of these zoo creatures in my room, and my parents had just bought me this new bed that had been smashed to bits.

DAVID BOOTH: So what did you say to them?

CHILD: I told the truth, because I knew that somehow they would understand.

DAVID BOOTH: You must have very fine parents.

CHILD: They're great.

When a child reads a story, it is the dynamic of narrative that propels him or her forward. Often in school we stress the ability to analyse after the story, rather than the skills of making meaning happen while in the interactive mode of reading, in other words, as the child is reading. Of course, teachers who are helping children to learn to read will have to develop strategies that help the child work inside the print mode, as he or she experiences the words. Drama can nurture this ability.

Would you rather . . .

Your dad did a dance at school

or your mom had a fight in a café

These two pictures usually take the child on a different journey. In drama, there is the *self* that one begins with, and the *other* that one takes on, and the *role* is the result of this combination. At times, the *self* is the motive force of the drama, dictating words and action from personal background and from a particular value system; at other times, the *other* is dominant, presenting a complex source to explore through talk and drama. *Role* is the juxtaposition of these two parts, so that the learning is

viewed internally but from a new or different perspective. (It is interesting to note that the artist in *Would You Rather...* has the same child character appear in each picture, as if the same *self* were involved in each new situation.)

In working with this part of the book, I found that the responses from these two pages were filtered through the personal experiences of the children. Those who chose the dad doing a dance at school had interesting reasons for such a happening – raising money for the Home and School Association, cheering up a class that had done poorly on a test, taking part in an ethnic day's activities. No one was embarrassed; everyone seemed to think that it had been a positive experience for both the dad and the class. However, when they depicted in small groups the restaurant scene, there were many conflicting emotions, most of them centering on the mother and her actions in the café. Many children in their reconstructions defended the mother's actions, but all were embarrassed.

GRADE 5 CHILD: We were in the McDonald's restaurant. My mother was in line, when suddenly a man butted in front of her. Right away, my mother's boyfriend came up and told that guy to get back into line.

Story after story concerned wrongs being righted, tensions taking over reason, families in disagreement. The story triggered the playing out of many stored-up tensions. The *self* and the *other* were melding, and the children found themselves united in their feelings about the row. This intersection of the children's private worlds and the world of the story produces power for building comprehension and response. A resonant relationship is set up between the individual responses of the students and the story. The children begin interacting with the story in ever-widening ways, adding to their childhood gardens an awareness of the lives



of their classmates, the world of the author, and their new-found perceptions in-role. (Burningham's Everychild is shown to be embarrassed in each situation.)

In a regular class with time to develop the situations, each of the ideas can be the beginning of a full-fledged drama lesson as well as a stimulus for word play and dramatic brainstorming.

Would you rather be lost . . .

In the fog, at sea, in a desert, in a forest or in a crowd

Each of these settings has been the basis for building a whole-class drama lesson. The dramas varied widely with the interests of the group. We have discovered missing cities arising from the mists of the past; we have been in lifeboats lost on the sea and have found an island from *Lord of the Flies*; we have searched for water in a desert, only to find it was controlled by an evil king; we have found in the forest a society of people who have lived underground for their entire lives; we have been lost in a crowd of aliens, unable to reveal our true identities until we could find someone we knew to be trustworthy.

Children learn to read through personal relationships, and the process of reading becomes an extension of these relationships. Children relate to the story in terms of their own identities, just as they do to their families, friends, and environments. Their stories have to fit with their own experiences and with the expectations of their communities. By responding to other people's cues and by receiving responses from them, children further establish their own identities, borrowing from others to see how their stories fit together. Children explore life through their own stories and those of others, creating their own unique narratives and ways of representing yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Would you rather . . .

Your house was surrounded by water, snow or jungle

A Grade 1 class had chosen their environments. Each child was demonstrating the difficulties and pleasures of his or her particular setting, and

I was observing them and gently prodding them with specific questions about the nature of their life styles. A child with Down's Syndrome was making angels in the snow, and, unsure of his abilities, I began asking him questions:

DAVID BOOTH: Is your house surrounded by snow?

*Child nods affirmatively.*

DAVID BOOTH: Do you like living here in the snow?

*Child again nods yes.*

DAVID BOOTH: Are you the King of Winter?

*Child nods yes.*

DAVID BOOTH: Then what are you wearing on your head?

CHILD: A crown of ice.

I would rather the children ... wear crowns of ice in summer, have eagles steal their vegetables, let hippos sleep in their beds, take breakfast in balloons, and be lost in childhood gardens. As also, I am certain, would John Burningham.

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*Epilogue:*

*The Reader in the Story*



## Epilogue: *The Reader in the Story*

Lissa Paul

When you think about a reader as an active participant in a story – rather than a passive *voyeur* – then the discussions about stories you have with children are a far cry from those you have if you focus your attention on a fixed-form text with a sacrosanct meaning. In *Growing With Books* active reading is encouraged, reading that is about negotiating (instead of defining) meaning, reading that does not privilege the objective autonomy of the text, but acknowledges the reader's participation in it.

Instead of suggesting name-the-main-character/what-is-the-theme/finding-the-facts reading (skimming, really, not reading), encourage readers to wrestle with meanings between words, and meanings that are over, under, and beyond the words on the page. Challenge the text, question it, and argue with it. This kind of beyond-the-text reading is really a more rigorous form of what used to be known as “close reading”. It requires that the reader pay close attention to the words on the page, to the cadences and rhythms of sentences, to the meanings that are made between words as well as in words.

We want to encourage readers to puzzle over meaning, as Alice does when she gets a good lesson from the March Hare on what words mean – and don't mean. The March Hare points out to her that “I say what I mean” is not the same thing as “I mean what I say”. Then, to clarify the issue, he adds, “You might as well say . . . that ‘I like what I get’ is the same as ‘I get what I like’”. Which, of course, it isn't.

If you are responding with horror to such suggestions – don't. After all, David Booth and Paul Shaw make eloquent cases for just how effective such open approaches to stories can be. They ask “What would happen if . . . ?” or “Would you rather . . . ?” or “If you were a participant in the story, what would you do?” The children they write about enter into the drama of the stories and are not distanced from the text. If anything, they are able to grapple more completely with the delicate, human issues.

It is up to the teacher, as David Booth says, to enable children “to use the story elements to structure their own thoughts”, and to move



"from the particular experience of the story to a more general understanding of the nature of what is being explored". Booth and Shaw suggest two basic routes for exploring stories: follow unwritten options and gaps in the story, filling in parts the author doesn't tell, and/or become a participant in the story, preferably as a creator and performer in it – an actor in a reader-created drama.

The children Booth and Shaw write about are encouraged to imagine themselves in the picture that the author is creating, to imagine themselves as characters, to act in ways that enable them to respond to the demands of the plot, to anticipate what might happen next and why – and then to imagine the consequences of those actions. The children come up with stories of breathtaking strength and economy, stories that show depths of humanity, sympathy, courage, and understanding, stories that constantly astonish us.

David Booth's example of the child who makes up a "Would you rather . . ." story about a mother jostled out of line at McDonald's is especially wrenching: the mother's boyfriend tells the guy "to get back into line". The phrase carries within it a whole book of stories, a lifetime of stories about the child's knowledge of human (especially family) relationships, power struggles, and good and evil.

It is difficult for us as adults, conditioned to the idea that children are innocent, to remember that children are actively engaged in defining the value systems that they will grow up into. They are testing out, playing, and performing acts that determine loyalty, courage, trust, virtue, honour, friendship; and they experience love and sorrow and hate and jealousy and envy. Just as we, as grown-ups, do.

One way to enable children to try out a range of human emotions and value systems is to introduce them to traditional – especially mythic, Greek, and medieval – stories and dramas. Through these stories children can discover for themselves just how like (and how unlike) our ancestors we are.

In a version of Euripides' *The Trojan Women* – enacted by school children – a twelve-year-old girl, as Andromache, wept and tenderly cradled the “body” of her five-year-old son after he had been thrown off the parapets off-stage. In that moment both children understood the truth of the tragedy. They participated in the feelings of jealousy and desire, misplaced loyalties, and uncontrolled passions that result in weeping mothers and dead children. They communicated that knowledge to the audience.

Another example. In a story-drama based on Donald Carrick's *Harald and the Giant Knight*,<sup>1</sup> primary-school children had to work out the problem that the protagonist in the story works out: what to do with the knights who are destroying the land that the peasants tend for their survival. The children in this school decided to handle the situation with a long-range plan. They decided to plant what, in spy-story jargon, would be called a “sleeper” or a “mole”. They appointed a child to apprentice as a knight, and subvert the established order from within. That is the kind of brilliant solution that demonstrates the capacity of children to understand the value of long-range planning. It also carries within it all kinds of implicit questions about morality, attitudes to the powers that be, obedience, standing up for your rights, and the like.<sup>2</sup>

In working with traditional Greek and medieval stories, children are able to see how we share the wishes, fears, and aspirations of those long-ago and far-away people. But traditional stories aren't the only way to enable children to negotiate the meaning of their existence, their being-in-the-world. Contemporary stories, as well, provide opportunities for self-exploration. Two stories that lend themselves to discussions about relationships between literature and life are: *From the Mixed-Up*

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1. Donald Carrick, *Harald and the Giant Knight* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

2. For further information on the use of drama in the classroom, see *Drama in the Formative Years: Curriculum Ideas for Teachers* (Toronto: Ministry of Education, 1984).

*Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* and *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang*.<sup>3</sup> Both are mystery stories – and they are about relationships between siblings and about running away. Both stories also provide lots of “What if . . . ?” points of departure.

In *From the Mixed-Up Files*, for example, “What if the children thought about how their parents would feel if their children ran away? What did their parents think about while the children were gone? What would you do if you were the parents looking for the children? Could you figure out where they might have gone? Where would you go if you wanted to run away from home? Why? Would you worry that your parents might be worried? Could you quiet their fears? How? By living in the museum, are the children breaking the law? What would happen if they broke something?”

*Jacob Two-Two* could be used to raise the problem of justice. Although the Hooded Fang is revealed as a good guy in the end, he still has a lot to answer for. The children were, after all, locked up under pretty terrible conditions. So you might think about a trial for the Hooded Fang. Or you could think about all the other possible stories in the story. “Does being a member of Child Power help Jacob come to terms with the injustice of his littleness? What other adventures could Jacob have with Child Power?”


In thinking about these kinds of questions, the reader is put in touch with two further questions that are important to reading, talking, and writing: How do others feel in a given situation? and, How well does the writer of the story make the characters alive and true? This helps the child learn to “recognize and appreciate models of good writing.”

As readers examine their own responses to a situation, they become conscious of the skill (or lack of it) that the writer has used under the

3. E. L. Konigsburg, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* (New York: Atheneum, 1967).

4. Mordecai Richler, *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* (New York: Bantam, 1975).

5. Ministry of Education, Ontario, *The Formative Years* (Toronto: Ministry of Education, 1975), p. 15.



same circumstances. Has a writer made a wrong choice about the direction of the story or the development of the character? What is wrong with it? Only by getting inside the story can the reader find out. That is how skills in reading and writing – and imagining – grow. The ability to get inside the story is what makes it possible. As David Booth says, he would rather children “wear crowns of ice in summer, have eagles steal their vegetables, let hippos sleep in their beds, take breakfast in balloons, and be lost in childhood gardens”.

## *Bibliography*

